

NOTEBOOKS

FAQ

Q I want to watch TV on my notebook. How do I go about this and are there any problems that I should know about?

A First you should consider your TV aerial. Although you can take your notebook anywhere, you may have to use a portable antenna that may not get good reception. Some TV tuners come with mini aerials, but there's no guarantee that these will work for you. It's best to check reception using a TV set before buying a tuner.

Next make sure that your notebook has a USB2 port, PC Card or ExpressCard slot, as TV tuners are available in all these formats. We would recommend buying a hybrid tuner unless you are certain that you can get good digital reception from your aerial. You should visit www.digitaluk.co.uk to see if it's possible to receive digital Freeview broadcasts in your area. Also remember to check the minimum specifications of the tuner before buying.

Finally, remember that you need a TV licence to watch TV on your notebook, or you could incur a hefty fine.

Seth Barton

Notebooks and video expert

seth@computershopper.co.uk



HP Pavilion dv9292eu

★★★★★

£944 inc VAT



HP's Pavilion dv9292eu is one of the most stylish desktop replacement notebooks we've reviewed. It has a big 17in widescreen display with a native resolution of 1,440x900 pixels, which can display about as much information as a 17in, 1,280x1,024-pixel desktop screen. It produces bright whites and has high levels of contrast. In our demanding greyscale and colour wheel tests it performed excellently, with smooth transitions between shades, making it ideal for colour-sensitive work such as photo manipulation.

Instead of using the notebook's display, you can connect an HD TV to its HDMI port. We tested it with a Sony LCD TV, which worked fine in 720p mode. We couldn't get the graphics driver to match the exact 1,366x768-pixel resolution of the TV, but even in standard 720p our HD video test files looked as good as we've ever seen them. Disappointingly, though, the HDMI output doesn't carry audio, so you'll need to use the line out or mini-jack S/PDIF.

Above the display are a microphone and a 1.3-megapixel webcam suitable for online video chat. Below is a metallic silver grille that hides the speakers. They sound better than those of most notebooks, with a balanced range and even some bass, but they distort above half-volume. A series of touch-sensitive buttons above the keyboard control the volume and basic media playback commands.

The keyboard is generally good, but we're not keen on the touch pad, which is more sensitive vertically than horizontally. There are two Media Center remote controls. One is tucked away in the



ExpressCard/54 slot; the other is larger and has a better key layout. The supplied digital TV tuner also uses the ExpressCard slot. It works with Media Center, which is part of the installed Windows Vista Home Premium operating system, and has an excellent interface and a great electronic programme guide. The big 160GB hard disk can hold around 100 hours of recorded TV.

It has a 2.0GHz AMD Turion 64 X2 TL-60 processor. It's not as fast as the 2.0GHz Intel Core 2 Duo T7200 used by PC Nextday's Zoostorm 53-7701 (see 'Also consider...' below), but it's easily quick enough for most tasks, including taxing jobs such as video

encoding. The graphics chipset is Nvidia's GeForce Go 7600. It's a lot quicker than the ATI chipset in the Zoostorm, and we had to reduce the high detail settings used in our Call of Duty 2 test only slightly to get a playable frame rate in the game. It's ideal if you want to play games occasionally.

This isn't as powerful as the Zoostorm in Windows applications, but outperforms it in 3D games. It's a pity the tuner isn't a hybrid model, but the excellent display makes it a better entertainment notebook for those with Freeview TV reception.

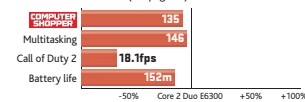
Seth Barton

SUMMARY

- ✓ Great display
- ✓ Decent 3D graphics
- ✗ Poor touch pad

NOTEBOOK PC 2GHz AMD Turion 64 X2 TL-60, 2GB RAM, 160GB hard disk, Nvidia GeForce Go 7600 graphics, DVD+/-RW +/-DL drive, 17in LCD widescreen, 3.6kg
PART CODE RW755EA
SUPPLIER www.comet.co.uk
DETAILS www.hpstore.hp.com

PERFORMANCE (see page 56)



Also consider...

PC NEXTDAY Zoostorm 53-7701 Family Laptop

★★★★★

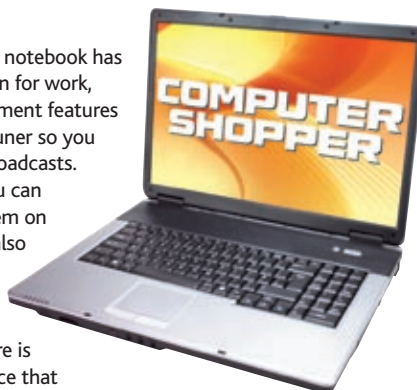
£881 inc VAT



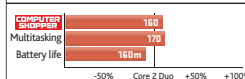
This desktop replacement notebook has an impressive specification for work, and some great entertainment features too. There's a built-in hybrid TV tuner so you can receive analogue or digital broadcasts. Using Windows Media Center, you can schedule recordings and store them on the big 160GB hard disk. There's also a decent 3D graphics chipset so you can play games.

The 17in widescreen display is fine for most purposes, but there is a light graininess across the surface that detracts from fine detail. It has a 1,440x900-pixel native resolution, giving you plenty of space to work with. The big screen also means there's space for a number pad alongside the keyboard.

Inside, there's a fast processor and 2GB of RAM. This notebook can take on the most demanding



NOTEBOOK PC 2GHz Intel Core 2 Duo T7200, 2GB RAM, 160GB hard disk, ATI Radeon Mobility X1600 graphics, DVD+/-RW +/-DL, 17in widescreen LCD, 3.6kg
SUPPLIER sales@pcnextday.co.uk
DETAILS www.pcnextday.co.uk
PART CODE 3353-7701
✓ Fast in applications; plenty of ports ✗ Grainy display
FULL REVIEW May 2007



tasks such as video editing and won't need upgrading for some time to come. Even the battery life is impressive for a notebook of this size. This is a great choice if you want lots of features and computing power for the lowest possible price.

ASUS A8JR

★★★★★

£700 inc VAT

Asus's A8JR is the first notebook we've seen with ATI's new Radeon Mobility X2300 graphics chipset. Although it's built in a slim chassis, it has an extensive set of ports that includes five USB2 ports and FireWire. The standard audio line out doubles as a mini-jack coaxial S/PDIF output for digital surround sound. The memory card reader accepts all common card formats except xD. There are D-sub, DVI and S-video outputs on the rear for connecting a range of displays.

The notebook's widescreen display is excellent, and capable of inky blacks, bright whites and smoothly blended colours. Its gloss finish isn't suitable for working in direct sunshine or under office lights, however. It measures only 14.1in diagonally, but has the same 1,280x800-pixel resolution as 15.4in displays. Above it is a built-in webcam for video chat sessions, and there's a microphone by the keyboard so you can be heard.

The reasonably compact display makes this notebook smaller than one with a 15.4in screen, and it weighs just 2.4kg so it's easy to carry. Once you've peeled off all the marketing stickers and logos, you can appreciate the A8JR's simple and attractive design. Its touch pad is big and accurate and sits flush with the wrist rest. Its buttons are almost indistinguishable from the touch pad, which looks great, but they don't click so it can be hard to tell if you've pressed them.

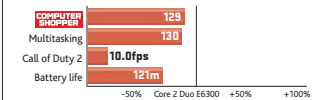
Inside, there's a 160GB hard disk, which provides plenty of room for your media files. The Gigabit Ethernet port means that network file transfers will be quick if you're connected to a Gigabit switch, and there's built-in Bluetooth for connecting to mobile devices such as a phone.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Dedicated graphics
- ✓ Great display
- ✗ Short battery life

NOTEBOOK PC 1.66GHz Intel Core 2 Duo T5500, 1GB RAM, 160GB hard disk, ATI Radeon Mobility X2300 graphics, DVD+/-RW +/-DL drive, 14.1in LCD widescreen, 2.4kg
PART CODE A8JR-4P011C
SUPPLIER Laptops Direct 08701 670818
DETAILS <http://uk.asus.com>

PERFORMANCE (see page 56)



The A8JR's scores in our tests show that ATI's Radeon Mobility X2300 is a lot quicker than the old X1300 chipset. You could even play fairly recent games on it if you reduce the detail settings. We had to turn off anti-aliasing and reduce the texture detail to get a playable frame rate in Call of Duty 2. It has 128MB of dedicated RAM and can use up to a further 128MB of system memory if necessary.

ATI claims that the X2300 is very power-efficient, but it didn't help the A8JR perform particularly well in our battery tests. It lasted just over two hours in our light-usage test; a disappointing score for a lightweight notebook that could have been ideal for use on the move. It fared better in our other benchmarks, with the Intel Core 2 Duo T5500 processor proving fast enough for all the but the most demanding tasks.

The A8JR is a well-equipped and well-designed notebook. However, it costs £200 more than Gateway's excellent MT6825b, reviewed in our *Labs* on page 68. It's still fairly good value, but its disappointing battery life limits its appeal.

Seth Barton

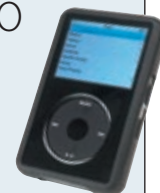
BYTE SIZE

CONTOUR DESIGN

Showcase video 60

★★★★★

£23 inc VAT



Contour's Showcase video 60 iPod case is made mostly of transparent plastic, so it doesn't hide your iPod's design. This model fits 60GB and 80GB video iPods, and another version is available for 30GB models.

The Showcase feels sturdy. Its rubber edge provides some shock protection, although its colour doesn't complement white iPods. The hinged case allows easy removal of your iPod, but at other times it's held firmly shut by two sliding latches. The click wheel, hold button, headphone socket and dock connector are easily accessible, but vulnerable to spills and dirt.

This is a well-designed iPod case, but Belkin's case (below) makes it seem rather pricy.

Alan Lu

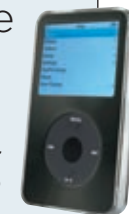
SUPPLIER www.ibitstore.com
DETAILS www.contourcase.com

BELKIN

Clear Acrylic and Brushed-Metal Case

★★★★★

£11 inc VAT



Belkin's iPod case comes with two clear acrylic backs, sized to fit 30GB or 60GB iPod with Video models.

There's a choice of brushed metal fronts, with pink, green and black versions available.

Installation of an iPod is simple, and the case clips together easily. The scroll wheel is protected by a plastic membrane, but it doesn't reduce the wheel's sensitivity and our iPod was no harder to use. The display is covered by an acrylic screen to prevent your iPod getting scratched.

Vakadoo's iVak Domino cases may be more stylish, but this is a well-priced way to keep your iPod protected.

David Ludlow

SUPPLIER www.smesolutions.co.uk
DETAILS www.belkin.co.uk

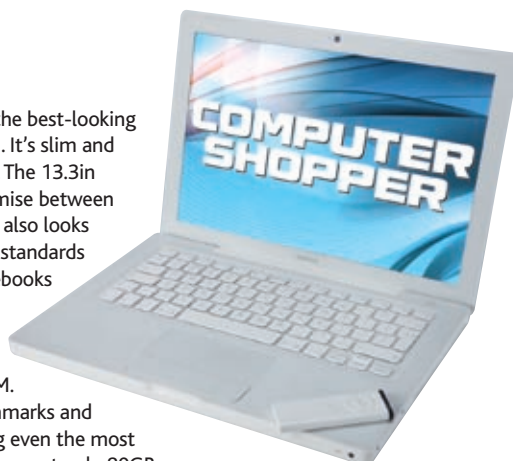
APPLE MacBook

★★★★★

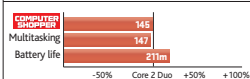
£879 inc VAT

The MacBook is possibly the best-looking notebook we've ever seen. It's slim and feels sturdily constructed. The 13.3in display is a good compromise between size and portability, but it also looks great: it's easily up to the standards of the best Windows notebooks we've tested.

Inside the system there is a fast dual-core processor and 1GB of RAM. It sped through our benchmarks and it is capable of performing even the most demanding of tasks. However, at only 80GB the hard disk is a little on the small side. The number and types of ports are also limited by the slender design; there are only two USB2 ports, for example, and there is no built-in modem, either.



NOTEBOOK PC 2.0GHz Intel Core 2 Duo T7200, 1GB RAM, 80GB hard disk, Intel GMA 950 graphics, DVD+/-RW +/-DL, 13.3in widescreen LCD
SUPPLIER www.apple.com/ukstore
DETAILS www.apple.com/uk
PART CODE MA700B/A
 ✓ Stylish chassis; great display
 ✗ Lacks many standard ports
FULL REVIEW Apr 2007



The touch pad is huge and accurate and the keyboard is generally good, but the Return key was a little too small for our liking. However, the MacBook has a long battery life, making it a great notebook for those wanting something both stylish and portable.

BYTE SIZE

ABACUS MobileWear CallerID Watch

★★★★★

£152 inc VAT



The MobileWear CallerID is a chunky analogue watch with a digital display and Bluetooth. After you've paired the watch with your Bluetooth phone, the watch vibrates and displays the caller ID of whoever is phoning you. You can use the watch's top button to silence your phone or reject the call, all without taking your phone out of your pocket. The watch also displays a message icon when you receive a text.

It sounds like a strange idea, but it works perfectly. It's refreshing not to have to dig out your phone to see who's calling, and it's easy to reject a call in an awkward situation. The watch is fairly expensive, but feels well made.

Chris Finnamore

SUPPLIER www.expansys.com
DETAILS www.abacuswatches.com

CORSAIR TurboFlash 1GB

★★★★★

£14 inc VAT



You can buy a simple 1GB USB flash drive for £11, but spending more can get you a quicker one. Corsair's TurboFlash 1GB is optimised for Vista's ReadyBoost feature, which uses a USB flash drive as a substitute for extra system RAM.

We tested ReadyBoost performance by running our benchmarks on a 512MB PC. Our PC scored about five per cent higher without ReadyBoost enabled. That said, we could read large files from the ReadyFlash at 30.5MB/s, and write them at 12.2MB/s. It could read small files at 12.1MB/s, which is fast.

Though its 0.18MB/s write speed for small files was poor, it's worth paying a small premium for its otherwise strong performance.

Simon Handby

SUPPLIER www.scan.co.uk
DETAILS www.corsair.com

HP

Compaq NX9420

★★★★★

£1,100 inc VAT

Many business notebooks are designed to be as portable as possible, so the 17in widescreen display on HP's Compaq NX9420 desktop replacement notebook makes it a bit of a rarity. However, a big widescreen display has a number of advantages even if you're not playing games or watching DVDs. This notebook has a massive 1,680x1,050-pixel native resolution, so it can display over 70 per cent more information than a standard 1,280x800 screen.

With such a big, high-resolution display, the NX9420 is useful for presentations or if you work with large spreadsheets or image files. It's unusual to see a reflective finish on a business notebook's screen, though. While it makes colours look richer, reflections can be a pain under office lighting, particularly if, as in this case, the display isn't especially bright. In other respects, though, image quality is fine.

We're not sure why business users would want to play 3D games, but the NX9420 has a decent ATI Radeon Mobility X1600 graphics chipset. This could improve performance in high-end media-production packages such as 3D Studio Max, or prove useful should you upgrade the notebook to Windows Vista and run its Aero desktop theme.

This notebook has a very fast 2.16GHz Intel Core 2 Duo T7400, which should ensure that demanding programs run smoothly. With 1GB of RAM, it was able to power through our benchmarks with ease. It's significantly overpowered for basic office tasks, but it's well suited to those who use desktop publishing software or work with large media files.

The chassis is fairly slim for such a big notebook. At 3.4kg it's not the



heaviest desktop replacement we've seen, but you wouldn't want to carry it far on a daily basis. That said, it has a long battery life – lasting an impressive five hours in our light-usage test – so you can work with it on the road should you need to. The big battery takes up most of the back edge of the base, so the ports are distributed between the left and right-hand sides.

The keyboard is excellent, with just the right amount of resistance, feedback and key travel. Bluetooth is included, so you can connect to your mobile phone or PDA. The notebook's 120GB hard disk

should be enough for most storage requirements, but the other two notebooks reviewed in *What's New* this month cost less and have 40GB more space.

The Compaq NX9420 is fast in Windows and 3D applications, has a great battery life and a high-resolution screen. Although it's quite expensive, its high specification means that it's still good value. It isn't likely to appeal to many business users, but it's a good choice for those who need a high-powered, occasional travelling companion.

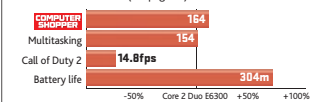
Seth Barton

SUMMARY

- ✓ Excellent keyboard
- ✓ Great battery life
- ✗ Over-specified for most office users

NOTEBOOK PC 2.16GHz Intel Core 2 Duo T7400, 1GB RAM, 120GB hard disk, ATI Radeon Mobility X1600 graphics, DVD+/-RW +/-DL drive, 17in LCD widescreen, 3.4kg
PART CODE RH457ET
SUPPLIER Laptops Direct 08701 670818
DETAILS www.hp.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 56)



Also consider...

SONY

Vaio VGN-FE41E

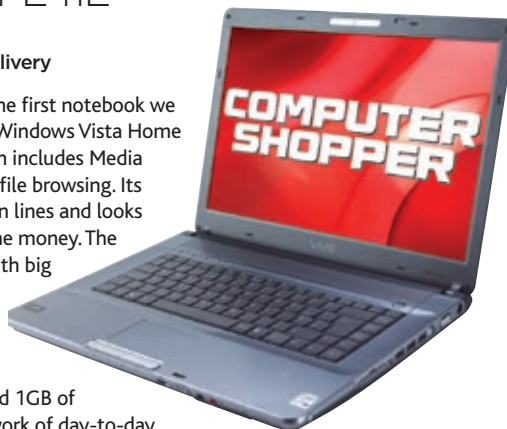
★★★★★

£800 inc VAT and delivery

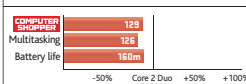


This Vaio was the first notebook we reviewed with Windows Vista Home Premium, which includes Media Center for easy media-file browsing. Its stylish chassis has clean lines and looks better than most for the money. The keyboard is unusual, with big flat keys, but they are well spaced and sensibly arranged.

Inside the case, a dual-core processor and 1GB of RAM will make short work of day-to-day tasks. There's a dedicated graphics chipset but it's not very fast, so you'll have to reduce detail levels to the minimum in modern games. There's a big 120GB hard disk on which to store all your files, and a wide range of quality pre-installed software for video and image editing.



NOTEBOOK PC 1.66GHz Intel Core 2 Duo T5500, 1GB RAM, 120GB hard disk, Nvidia GeForce Go 7400 graphics, DVD+/-RW +/-DL, 15.4in widescreen LCD
SUPPLIER www.play.com
DETAILS www.sony.co.uk
PART CODE VGN-FE41E
✓ Good Windows performance; stylish; comprehensive software bundle FULL REVIEW Apr 2007



At 2.8kg the Vaio VGN-FE41E is portable, and the battery lasted for an acceptable two hours and 40 minutes. It's a good notebook with a welcome dash of style and an impressive software bundle, and all for a decent price.

BYTE SIZE

TECH 21 L.I.P.S. Pro Backpack

★★★★★
£40 inc VAT

L.I.P.S. apparently stands for Laptop Impact Protection System, which is a rather grand way of describing this slimline padded notebook backpack.

It's made from austere black material, but on opening it up you're confronted with a violently red interior, seatbelt-like straps and large Velcro flaps. You wrap the straps around your notebook and fasten them shut with the flaps, so your notebook hangs suspended from the top of the bag. This should offer some protection if the bag is dropped, as the notebook's base won't impact the ground and the stretch in the flaps should cushion the blow.

The bag also has a metal frame around the edges and feels bombproof, but it's very heavy, even when empty.

Chris Finnamore

SUPPLIER www.ebags.co.uk
DETAILS www.lipsbags.com

3M Widescreen Laptop Privacy Computer Filter PF15.4W

★★★★★
£45 inc VAT

If you're viewing confidential files in public you don't want people looking over your shoulder. This plastic screen fits over your notebook's display and is secured with sticky pads, or tabs that allow removal and refitting. There's a choice of available sizes.

If you sit directly in front of the screen you'll experience only a slight darkening. To anyone looking from the sides, though, your screen appears completely dark. This might make them think you're a bit odd, but at least they won't be able to see what you're looking at.

Simon Handby

SUPPLIER www.misco.co.uk
DETAILS www.3m.co.uk



CHOOSING A... Notebook Computer

Follow the steps to find your ideal specs

PROCESSOR: 1.6GHz Intel Celeron M 420
MEMORY: 512MB DDR
HARD DISK: 60GB
STORAGE: DVD rewriter
GRAPHICS: Integrated (shares system memory)
SCREEN: 15.4in widescreen 1,280x800 LCD
EXTRAS: Wireless networking
CONNECTORS: Three USB2, memory card reader
SOFTWARE: Windows Vista Home Premium
WEIGHT: 3kg
Recommended minimum in grey

1 The minimum specification of notebook we recommend, shown above in grey, is a good starting point when working out your ideal system. This is an average notebook that should cost around £600. It is not particularly powerful or, at 3kg, particularly portable.

2 Dual-core processors, such as Intel's Core 2 Duo range, can be much faster at many tough tasks. This is dependent on software support, but a lot of applications have now been optimised. Dual-core processors are widely available and often cost only a little more than their single-core equivalents.

3 Most notebooks come with 15.4in 1,280x800 widescreen displays, which are great for watching DVDs or TV. If you want a notebook for use around the home, especially for entertainment purposes, it's worth considering one with a larger 17in display. This will also have a higher native resolution of at least 1,440x900, giving you a bigger desktop. This makes it far easier to use complex applications, such as photo- or video-editing software.

4 A modem, 10/100 Ethernet port and wireless 802.11b/g networking (WiFi) should be fitted as standard, but there are also some other ports and connectors that you might want. FireWire (IEEE 1394) is common and useful for digital video enthusiasts. Bluetooth is handy for connecting to a mobile phone, but it's usually fitted only to more expensive business notebooks. Memory card readers are pretty much standard, but check that your camera or MP3 player's format is supported.

5 If portability is your main priority, look for notebooks with 12.1in displays.

Spending around £1,000 will get you an ultra-portable notebook that weighs under 2kg. Most of these notebooks are just as powerful as their larger counterparts, though some use slower, ultra-low voltage (ULV) processors to further increase battery life.

6 Some ultra-portables can attach to an optional docking station, which incorporates drives, ports and power, when you get home to your desk. It's the best of both worlds, but tends to be expensive. Others have separate DVD drives to help keep size and weight to a minimum.

7 If you're not swayed by ultra-portable chic, you can get a lot more for your money. Entertainment notebooks pile on the features but still keep the price under £1,200. You should expect a 17in widescreen display, hybrid TV tuner and a remote control.

8 There are features you can add to a notebook without increasing the weight or reducing battery life. A 120GB or 160GB hard disk will give you much more storage space, while 1GB of RAM will help you speed through tougher tasks. DVD rewriter drives are standard and will allow you to burn CDs and DVDs on your notebook.

9 Dedicated graphics let you play modern 3D games and are increasingly common on all but the cheapest or lightest notebooks. Look for an ATI Radeon Mobility X1600 or Nvidia GeForce Go 7600 chip as a minimum for getting smooth frame rates on the latest titles. Many notebooks use integrated graphics, which are fine for all other purposes, but use up system memory.

10 Once you're happy with your specification, start to shortlist some models you can afford. Check the weight, display size and battery life of each of them. If these are not acceptable, you need to reconsider your priorities and which features you really need.

